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George MacDonald and Jean Paul: An Introduction

William Webb

Why was George MacDonald so strongly drawn to German literature of the Romantic period? Did these poets and story-tellers show him a different way of regarding the world, or was their work more like confirmation of what he had already felt and thought for himself? I recently discussed MacDonald in relation to the poet Novalis,¹ here I want to consider the influence of another German, a novelist of a kind unique in German and probably in any other language.

As with Novalis, MacDonald seems to have had a truly personal feeling for Jean Paul Richter (1763-1825). He was originally Johann Paul Friedrich Richter, but he preferred to use only his first two names, with the first changed to Jean as a tribute to Rousseau whom he greatly admired. Jean Paul cannot be labeled a religious writer, but he is not a materialist either and has his own brand of mysticism. Thomas Carlyle showed enormous enthusiasm for him and was probably his greatest admirer in the English-speaking world. He insists upon the German's firm belief in immortality.

Jean Paul is so little known in Britain and America today that one is surprised how often one meets with his name when reading books of the nineteenth century. Carlyle translated many of his works. Other writers whom he influenced included De Quincey and Meredith. In an unexpected testimonial we actually find Sherlock Holmes discussing Jean Paul and suggesting that the German had been the fountain-head of Carlyle's own work.

Jean Paul was the son of a clergyman in Bavaria, and he had to struggle with poverty for most of his early life. He went to university but was unable to complete his studies there. He turned to journalism to get a bare living. Later he found aristocratic and even royal patronage. He became especially popular with women readers—who were in any case the main public for fiction in Germany and England. He did not express his imaginations in the form of the Märchen or “fairy tale,” and he cannot really be called a myth-maker. He was acquainted with the leading English novelists of the eighteenth century, and shows the influence of Lawrence Sterne. Like Sterne, he is an eccentric who delights in catching the reader by surprise with sudden **[end of page 65]** changes of mood or strange digressions. He is fond of learned footnotes, sometimes burlesquing more solemn authors. His

own imagery and allusions are quite often derived from extraordinary items in encyclopedias of the time.

His more serious side is very different. He abandons irony when describing heroic or tragic incidents—and when dealing with nature, which can arouse a particular ecstasy in him. Like MacDonald, he occasionally gives us scenes in Italy, although Jean Paul never actually saw these himself.

His use of dreams in fiction is very original; in fact the “Dream” becomes a new literary form in his hands, which has been the subject of special academic studies. Such dreams are usually not integrated into the main story but are insertions or digressions. They are sometimes mysterious and apocalyptic, and may express a tragic nihilism, of a depth not found in French or English literature until almost a century later. I shall mention a dream that particularly impressed MacDonald further on.

Other interludes in Jean Paul’s narratives are general comments or intrusions by the author in his own person. Occasionally there are comments by a character from an entirely different novel of his.

Before turning to MacDonald’s actual references to Jean Paul, it is worth mentioning that English readers can get a fair idea of him from the translations of Carlyle, along with his prefaces to these. The American poet Longfellow visited Germany and produced a book called *Hyperion* (1839) showing how he succumbed to the magic of German Romantic literature. *Hyperion* is largely based upon his own experiences and includes an appreciative chapter on Jean Paul, the “Only One.” Longfellow’s story *Kavanagh* has a strong flavour of Jean Paul about it. If MacDonald had gone to Germany to study science, as at one time he thought of doing, he might have produced a semi-autobiographical work something like *Hyperion* himself.

MacDonald is fond of chapter mottoes or epigraphs in his first books, and one from Jean Paul heads chapter 18 of *Phantastes*. I will discuss this one a little later. In his first realistic story, *David Elginbrod*, chapter 2 has an epigraph from Jean Paul on the subject of education. If MacDonald had not named the novel quoted—*The Invisible Lodge*—I should have assumed it was from *Levana*, a work on education influenced by the ideas of Rousseau. However, the novel mentioned is indeed a *Bildungsroman*, a study of the hero’s development. MacDonald’s stories *Alec Forbes* and *Robert Falconer*—and to some extent *Ranald Bannerman’s Boyhood*—are in the *Bildungsroman* class, and all show traces of reading Jean Paul. [66]

In *Alec Forbes*, MacDonald seems to draw on Jean Paul particularly

in relation to the characters of women—"feminality," as he calls it in another book. Women may change their attitudes to you overnight, he says (209), agreeing with an observation in Jean Paul's *Hesperus* (vol.3. 207). Some pages further on we encounter the opinion of MacDonald's character Kate that everything must be sacrificed to Love, and the young Alec is inclined to believe her. MacDonald implies that she has been over-influenced by romantic fiction. There is a similar situation, involving the character Linda, in Jean Paul's *Titan*. MacDonald seems to feel that Jean Paul is especially wise on the subject of women's psychology.

Jean Paul's appearance in *Robert Falconer* is more revealing, and more relevant to MacDonald's own gifts as a novelist. The young Robert escapes for a while from his cheerless home to stay at a farm and enjoy the delights of freedom in the country (108-09). In a passage of his best prose, MacDonald evokes country sights, sounds and scents—and yet modestly tells us that only Jean Paul could have done justice to this theme of boyish ecstasy. I doubt if the latter could have done it better in this case, though he is indeed a skilful word-painter.

MacDonald's story *Ranald Bannerman's Boyhood* contains a very personal account of the hero's guilt and fear when he has run away from home after being treated cruelly by a teacher at the local school. He eventually returns, longing for the comfort of his father's presence, even though he expects to be punished for disobedience. When, for some reason, his father cannot be found, the boy experiences utter despair and cries himself to sleep:

Years after . . . I read Jean Paul's terrible dream that there was no God, and the desolation of this night was my key to that dream. (46)²

The incident might well be autobiography as it makes such an impression of truth. The reference is to a "Dream" which became much more famous than the novel in which it occurs—*Flower, Fruit and Thorn Pieces*. The dream has no obvious connection with the main story, but has its own heading: "Speech of the dead Christ from the cross." The author evokes a dark and grim atmosphere as the human dead look up and ask if there is a God. From far above them Christ replies: "There is no God" (256). Carlyle was one of those who were greatly moved by this bleak despairing vision.

No doubt MacDonald was an experienced dreamer (if one can put it like that) before he knew of Jean Paul, but it is possible the German gave him more confidence in using dreams in his fiction—though never as separate, [67] detachable elements. This dream denial of God may have influenced

in a general way MacDonald's *Wilfrid Cumberlande*, written at about the same time as the story of Ranald. It has a dark and pessimistic tone, with a love affair which ends in frustration and bitter disappointment. The suicide of Wilfrid's best friend is treated with more tolerance than one would have expected from a profoundly Christian writer, and some of the dreams related are unusually macabre.

In Jean Paul's novel *Titan*, MacDonald seems to have been particularly struck by the character Schoppe, who is the satiric chorus of the narrative. He had first appeared in the *Flower Pieces* under a different name. Schoppe comes to a fancy-dress ball at court, carrying in a glass case a sort of portable puppet show in which the figures imitate the dancing humans and are also reflected in a mirror at the back (vol.1. 347). MacDonald uses this scene as a comparison, in *A Dish of Orts*, when about to review a book containing a collection of book reviews (T.T. Lynch *Essays on Some Forms of Literature*). In this task he himself feels involved in a similar situation of multiple reflections (218-19).

MacDonald associates the figure of Schoppe with thoughts of the Self and man's true identity. "No one has my form but the I [the self or ego]," Schoppe says, and MacDonald uses this as one of the epigraphs for chapter 22 of *Phantastes*. Jean Paul was influenced by certain philosophers of his time in Germany, especially Fichte, who treated the subject of human personality and identity. Themes such as mirror images, *Doppelgangers* and duplicate selves had a great appeal to writers of fantasy like Hoffmann and Tieck, and we see them also in MacDonald's *Phantastes*, *The Flight of the Shadow* and *Lilith*. It may be significant that MacDonald brings the mirror into a different context in another epigraph in *Phantastes* (chapter 18). He decides to put a prose thought from Jean Paul into verse:

From dreams of bliss shall men awake
One day, but not to weep:
The dreams remain, they only break
The mirror of the sleep.

The word 'mirror' is not in the original at all.

Jean Paul himself may have been influenced by the short-lived poet Novalis, who more than once expresses a very similar idea to the lines quoted, for instance in words which MacDonald puts at the head of the very last chapter of *Phantastes*: "Our life is no dream, but it ought to become one, and perhaps will." [68]

I have not succeeded in tracking down every quotation or reference

to Jean Paul in MacDonald to an exact source. Generally, the German demands slow reading, as his thought, vocabulary and general style are all difficult at times—and his works are voluminous. One of the untraced quotations is in the essay by MacDonald on Shakespeare's tragic heroes in *A Dish of Orts*, where he agrees with Jean Paul that we have a desire to follow them into a future life, to have "a piece of the next world painted in" (131).

MacDonald refers to the physical appearance of Jean Paul in his novel *Weighed and Wanting*. When he says his character resembled the portrait of Jean Paul "in the Paris edition of his works" (93), did he really expect his readers to have Jean Paul's works to hand in the specified edition? It seems too much to expect. But the physical appearance of certain writers seems to have been as important to MacDonald as the portraits of Shakespeare and Milton were to John Keats. Novalis and Jean Paul especially were personalities, not merely printed pages.

Also in *Weighed and Wanting*, MacDonald makes a brief reference, as a metaphor, to a staircase mentioned by Jean Paul which took a person up when he thought he was going down. I have not found a source for this, but the significance of stairs in stories by MacDonald has often been noted.

The thought of stairs leading up towards air and heaven suggests another topic which links MacDonald and the German author: the open air as a release from various prisons or restricting conditions—some kind of flight towards the Divine. MacDonald always writes well on this theme of air and space, of wind and sky. One thinks of little Diamond's experiences with North Wind, which are so wonderful as well as alarming. Other characters delight in escaping into the free air of the hills, as Sir Gibbie does after terrible events. in the city. Robert Falconer climbs the dizzy height of Antwerp cathedral tower and finds it a spiritual revelation (as did MacDonald himself on his travels). I should like to relate this heartfelt writing to a passage from *Titian*:

Albano stationed himself on the outermost ridge of the valley that opened out so beautifully below, and every gust of wind blew into his heart that old childish longing to be able to fly. Oh what bliss, to tear oneself away from the weight of earth that drags us back and to rise up free, home away into the distant aether—to splash about as it were in the bath of air as it blows through you, to fly into the dawn clouds and hover unseen near the lark that sings beneath you—to fly in the eagle's wake, and look on cities below with their patterns of [69] steps, long

rivers stretched like grey ropes between different countries, meadows and hills sunk into little patches of colour and shadows of varied hues—to sink, at last onto the top of some tower and face the burning evening sun—then to fly up after it has set and watch it passing into the chasm of night, while you still flutter intoxicated among the crimson clouds that burn like a forest fire. (vol.1. 98)

Similarly MacDonald's Gibbie felt like "the monarch of space," "his lungs filled with the heavenly air" (72). In *Heather and Snow*, Steenie longs for the spaces of heaven but is always held back by his "terrible heavy feet" (36). When MacDonald's characters climb roofs or escape through high windows, one notices, even in passing, the same sensitivity to aerial space.

In *Wilfrid Cumbermede*, MacDonald (in the person of the narrator Wilfrid) draws attention to a favourite motif in Jean Paul, that of the character apparently of humble origin who is finally proved to be the son of some distinguished or aristocratic person, perhaps heir to an estate. This much-used theme belongs to folk tales in the first place, but MacDonald assures us that although his hero had this fancy about himself "he had not yet read *Titan*, or *Hesperus* or *Comet*" (76), all books by Jean Paul. MacDonald's Sir Gibbie, Malcolm, and Clare (the hero of *A Rough Shaking*) are all "lost heirs."

I mentioned that Jean Paul knew the work of the English writer Lawrence Sterne. Literary historians have never found anyone to set beside Jean Paul, with the one exception of this famous clerical novelist. Yet Sterne is the only author named by MacDonald for whom he had an active dislike. From other references we can be sure that he put his own feelings into the mouth of the eloquent if unrespectable Mr Cupples in *Alec Forbes*, where he maintains that Sterne's *Tristram Shandy* is "a pailace o' dirt and impidence and speeritual stink" (173). Certainly Sterne is not a poet or visionary or true nature-lover, yet the situation seems strange. Did MacDonald ever sample Sterne's many published sermons—or would he have dismissed them as mere hypocrisy? The subject seems worth further investigation.

Jean Paul will probably never regain the reputation among readers of English that he had throughout the nineteenth century and up to the first world war. The eulogies of Thomas Carlyle are too high-pitched to convince readers today. But I have endeavoured to show the lasting admiration that George MacDonald felt. He would certainly have agreed with the opinion of that wise investigator Sherlock Holmes in chapter 7 of *The Sign of Four*: "There is much food for thought in Richter." [70]

Notes

1. *Novalis, Hymns to the Night; Spiritual Songs*. Trs. George MacDonald. With Afterword by William Webb. London: Temple Lodge, 1992.
2. The dream is quoted in Sneed, J.W. *Jean Paul's Dreams*. London: Oxford U.P. 1966.
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By Jean Paul

Flower, Fruit and Thorn Pieces. Reclam, undated.
Hesperus 1841.
Titian. 1846. [71]